4. Russia, Poland and the “New Europe”: Inevitable Clash?*

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The Russia-Poland relationship has never been ordinary. Rivalry and mistrust have been generally predominant. This attitude did not change during the Cold War, when Poland was integrated into the so-called ‘Soviet Bloc’. Quite the contrary, this historical experience fuelled new suspicions, adding ideological divergences to traditional Moscow-Warsaw geopolitical competition. From this standpoint the Russia-Poland relationship presents undeniable specificities, clearly different from relations with the other regional countries. Therefore the very concept of “New Europe”, elaborated after 1989, could be misleading, unfit to embrace the wider set of different geopolitical interests and attitudes towards Russia in the region. The Baltic States, with a large Russian-speaking population, and Poland have traditionally had strong anti-Russian sentiments, fearing the revival of Russia’s imperialistic ambitions. At the same time, statements by Hungarian and Czech Republic leaders show that their foreign policy vector is changing toward closer relations with Russia, mainly motivated by their energy security issues and the economic concessions that Russia is ready to offer in exchange for their formal loyalty.

With a view to analysing the dynamics of these relations, and better understanding the origins of major unresolved issues between Russia and Eastern Europe, it is key to start from a historical prospective, thus highlighting the roots to the current situation.
At the roots of the confrontation

The Central and Eastern Europe 1945 post-war borders were progressively demarcated by leaders of the anti-German alliance during the conferences in Teheran (1943), Yalta and Potsdam (1945). Despite the fact that Poland formally belonged to the victorious countries of World War II, its eastern border was also changed in accordance with the so-called Curzon line or along the river Bug. Thus the eastern territories, with the city of Wilno (in Lithuanian Vilnius) and Lwów (in Ukraine called Lviv) were excluded from Polish borders.

Therefore, after 1945 post-war Poland was faced with the challenges of rebuilding the country in a situation of border changes, massive material and population losses, and radical political and geopolitical changes. Moreover, international politics strongly affected Poland’s internal dimension, as clearly testified to by its participation in the Warsaw Pact’s invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968). Therefore during the 1950s and 1960s Polish foreign policy was characterized by its ideological, political and military dependency on the Soviet Union. At the same time, the issue of its western borders largely regulated through the Federal Republic of Germany’s recognition (in 1970) of the Oder-Neisse line had important impact as well.

The international situation changed substantially in the late 1970s and 1980s with the election of Pope Cardinal Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) and the rise of the “Solidarność” movement (1980). Despite attempts to maintain the Communist system (including a military coup by Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland on 13 December 1981, but also attempts to reform the system under the “perestroika” of Gorbachev), the 1980s brought about the fall of communist ideology and the collapse of the Soviet power system. In Poland on 4 June 1989 the first free (though not fully democratic) parliamentary elections in post-war Poland were held, bringing victory to “Solidarność”, and marking the symbolic end of Moscow’s domination of Poland.
The changes in Central and Eastern Europe that had began in Poland in 1989 led to the dissolution of the Soviet bloc and became one of the causes of the USSR’s dissolution in 1991. Russia was turned into the Russian Federation and a number of newly independent states (Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus) became Poland’s neighbours. The Russian Federation shares a border (on the northeast) with Poland: it is the so-called enclave of Kaliningrad. Since 2004, the eastern border of Poland has also become an important part of the new eastern borders of the European Union.

It is interesting to note that the first country to recognize the independence of Ukraine was Poland (in 1991). The Polish policy of reconciling Ukraine with Europe and the Euro-Atlantic alliance (in the 1990s we also had hopes of including Belarus, already ruled by Aleksandr Lukashenko, into this process) was no doubt influenced by the concepts of a Polish emigré magazine called Kultura, published in Paris and directed by Jerzy Giedroyc, but also by the ideas of Professor Zbigniew Brzeziński, sovietologist and an American of Polish descent. According to these conceptions an independent Ukraine was to ensure the independence of Poland.

In the 1990s and the early years of the XXI century, Poland established a policy of supporting the sovereignty of countries detaching from the USSR, including Ukraine (the Orange Revolution) and Georgia (the period of Mikhail Saakashvili’s presidency). Moscow has always opposed Polish policies of supporting the independence and development of democracy in countries like Ukraine or Georgia and for this reason from the early 1990s until today the relations between Poland and Russia have been tense and conflicting (except for short periods of thaw tests).

The government of Donald Tusk – who was Prime Minister of Poland in the period 2007-2014 – from 2010 to 2013 tried to adopt the policy of ‘thaw’ or ‘reset’ in relations with Russia (being, however, strongly opposed by President Lech Kaczyński and the leader of the main opposition party, the president’s brother,
Jarosław Kaczyński. It should be recalled that President Lech Kaczyński (tragically died in the Smolensk air disaster on Russian territory in April 2010) became famous for delivering “a geopolitical prophecy” during a meeting in Tbilisi in 2008 in the course of the Russian-Georgian war. Regarding the aggressive policy of Putin’s Russia, he argued that Georgia was its first victim, but that later on Russian tanks could appear – in order of succession – in Ukraine, the Baltic States and finally in Poland.

From Warsaw to Moscow: today’s confrontation

Besides the aversion Polish politicians had towards the ‘thaw’ in relations with Russia, there have been and still remain objective geopolitical reasons for conflict between Poland and Russia. These reasons particularly include the historical complexities linking Poland, Ukraine and Russia, but also the issue of energy security, and finally the role of Poland in its preparation for and active membership in the EU and NATO. This list has recently been increased by the support Poland gave Ukraine during the “Maidan Revolution”, as well as after the fall of Viktor Yanukovych’s regime. Additionally, Poland provided Ukrainians with political support in the context of the Russian occupation of Crimea and the military conflict with the so-called ‘pro-Russian rebels’ in the southeast of Ukraine.

It should be emphasized that the “Maidan Revolution” (2013-14) caused a fairly radical change in the attitudes of the Polish government, including Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, towards Putin’s Russia. Mutual accusations and the use of language typical of the Cold War were heard in both Moscow and Warsaw.

The decision made at the 2014 summit in Brussels to appoint Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to the position of President of the European Council is important and seemed to signal the EU’s firm stand against Moscow. It should also be remembered that during that same meeting of EU Heads of State and Government a line of ‘geopolitical balance’ was confirmed, urging the two
shores of the European continent (the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean) to complement each other instead of compete.

Poland as a member of the EU and of NATO clearly gave its support to the new Ukrainian leadership (President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arsenij Yatsenyuk) that emerged after the “Maidan Revolution”. The Polish government did not accept the annexation of Crimea and even the Polish press and television, reporting on the ongoing war in Ukraine, denounced – especially during the summer of 2014 – the Russian military presence in the southeast of the Ukrainian state and its support for the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Republics during the war that was supposed to be concluded with a cease-fire agreed upon in Minsk through the mediation of the President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko. In particular, during the negotiations started in Minsk the so-called ‘Normandy Format’ was used. In fact, the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Allied landing in Normandy in 1944 offered the chance to involve France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine in the discussion of possible solutions to the crisis.

At this point it is necessary to examine the objectives of Russian policy that had become bitterly anti-Western by the at the end of 2013 and even more so in 2014, Evidences of this dynamic relate to the so-called Eurasian Union, a project that is strongly supported by the Putin entourage. With this union Russia would not be a simple regional power but a world superpower, as in the days of the USSR. It should be added that from the viewpoint of Putin’s ideological line such an outlook is very close to the nationalist view, and symbolized by the Kremlin’s alliance with the Orthodox Church – seemingly a geopolitical attempt at reconstruction of “Greater Russia” in such a way that one might sense the inheritance of both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.

The new policy and military actions of President Putin’s Russia were put into practice in 2014 in Crimea. Through clever military operations (with Russian special forces that acted in full anonymity), politics (a referendum with 95 per cent in favour of reunification with ‘motherland Russia’) and finally propaganda
(with Russian television being in the ‘front line’) Putin’s Russia made the annexation – in March 2014 – of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, thereby consolidating its geostrategic position on the Black Sea.

It should be borne in mind that the ultimate goal of Putin’s policy is a radical change in the current territorial system of Central and Eastern Europe, with the intention of regaining direct or indirect influence over some former Soviet territories. Putin himself has repeatedly said that the dissolution of the USSR (by which he also means the fall of Russian domination) was “the largest geopolitical catastrophe” of the XX century. Putin’s wars, from Georgia to Ukraine, have a territorial and geopolitical character. The Russian annexation of Crimea and de facto domination over the Donbas region means – in particular regarding Crimea – a serious violation of international law and a dangerous precedent for possible territorial changes in Europe.

Nevertheless it is important to point out that some Eastern and Central European countries show attitudes that differ from that of Warsaw. Hungary’s Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, has recently met Vladimir Putin signing an important energy agreement. The Czech Republic’s President, Miloš Zeman, in his interview with a Russian radio station said that his dream is to see Russia as a member of the European Union. Nevertheless, these positions do not derive from a pro-Russian policy, but are motivated by the political, economic and military opportunities that such cooperation can provide.

**No room for historical reconciliation?**

The current Russian ‘historical narrative’ on Polish-Russian relations and the assessment of Polish politics is clearly negative. However, it should be noted that in the first decade of the twenty-first century attempts to understand the complexity of these relationships were made – a noble effort, considering it took place under the most difficult circumstances in the entire history of Polish-Russian relations throughout the twentieth century. As a
result of research conducted both by Polish and Russian historians, a work (of nearly 900 pages) was published in 2010, edited through Adam D. Rotfeld and Anatoly W. Torkunov’s joint effort and titled *White stains - black stains. Difficult issues in Polish-Russian relations, 1918-2008* (Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, 2010)\(^1\).

Only five years ago, in 2010, it seemed that there was a possibility of agreement between Poland and Russia even on the most sensitive issues, symbolized for decades by the Soviet denial, maintained also in the new Russia, of one of the cruellest crimes of Stalinism – the massacre of prisoners of war, Polish officers, which took place in 1940 in Katyń. But despite the fact that Russian leaders have accepted the true course of events of the 1940s – which was in itself an important breakthrough – a shadow was cast over the celebrations at Katyń in 2010 by the plane crash over Smolensk, in which the then Polish president, Lech Kaczyński, and 95 representatives of the Polish political elite perished. And so at the beginning of the second decade of the XXI century, in the specific context of the Ukrainian crisis initiated by the pro-European “Maidan Revolution” in 2013, Russia officially and in a decisive manner denied any attempts to open – in terms of historical policy – to Polish postulates, returning to the traditional interpretation of Polish-Russian relations that marked Soviet times. Jan Rydel points to Polish attempts to maintain dialog with regard to a jointly acknowledged historical policy, stressing that *the so-called reset in Polish-Russian relations was also to include historical policy*. The Polish scholar recalls that in 2009 a successful Polish-Russian-German conference on the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was held. During the same year Vladimir Putin was the guest of honour at the Polish celebrations of the 70\(^{th}\) anniversary of outbreak of World War II, and in 2011 the Polish Parliament decided to create a Center for Polish-Russian Dialog and Understanding. Finally – trying to repeat the formula of

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“forgive and ask for forgiveness” – the chairman of the Polish Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Józef Michalik, and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in 2012 signed a joint *Message to the Polish and Russian nations*. Despite these attempts at reconciliation – especially with respect to a common, difficult history – current political events, situating Poland and Russia on opposite sides of geopolitical disputes, led *de facto* to the cancellation of all joint activities of this kind. Moreover, according to Rydel: “the objective was not achieved, as the aforesaid religious act was prepared according to an explicitly political order, and the ‘Message’ was signed in circumstances more fit for an international agreement than an act of goodwill and reflex conscience”\(^2\).

A sign of collapse of the joint historical policy based on the principle of Polish-Russian reconciliation and forgiveness was, among others, the return of Russia to the traditional – i.e. Soviet or even Stalinist – geopolitical interpretation of the origins and consequences of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 23 August 1939, which resulted in a Soviet alliance with the Third Reich (1939-1941), and for the Poles meant the invasion of the Red Army on 17 September 1939 and a ‘fourth partition’ of Polish territories, leaving the Polish East under Soviet control. While Western Europe, but also Poland, does not negate the USSR’s contribution to the victory over the Third Reich, the interpretation of the origins of the world conflict, especially the issue of the current Russian view of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, encounters debate and sometimes firm opposition. In March 2015 Polish historians decisively criticized the wording of a joint German-Russian history textbook about the XXI century, which upheld the former Soviet thesis on the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact stating that in 1939 Stalin “had no choice and was forced to enter into a pact with Hitler”. A critical opinion of the Russian stance on this was expressed on the Polish side by Łukasz Kamiński, President of the

Institute of National Remembrance, stating for the portal Interia.pl that: “attempts at falsifying facts of this kind are very worrying”\textsuperscript{3}. In this context it seems important to cite Timothy Snyder, who argued that Russia’s ‘historical policy’ is directly linked to its foreign policy, aimed at destabilization of the international order\textsuperscript{4}.

**Energy security issue in bilateral relations**

A general evaluation of Polish-Soviet economic relations is not easy, all the more so that it cannot be detached from ideological or geopolitical disputes. There is no doubt that a number of economic links – especially in the energy sector – have survived the collapse of the Soviet system and still affect, often negatively, contemporary economic relations between Poland and Russia.

For contemporary Poland an issue of considerable economic, but also geostrategic and geopolitical, importance is energy security. It is widely viewed as being both internal – aimed at diversifying the sourcing of energy and power development as a strategic sector of the economy, but also external – aimed at attracting economic partners in mining and the transport and distribution of energy resources.

Energy security is one of the major issues in the relations between Russia and Eastern Europe. The Eastern European countries have traditionally been more dependent on Russian oil and gas than their Western neighbours. The Baltic States import their entire gas supply from Russia. Russian gas amounts to 99 per cent of the Czech Republic’s imports and to 89 per cent of


Hungarian consumption. Last year Poland imported as much as 60 per cent of its gas consumption from Russia, while it is starting to become much better at looking after its energy needs.

All the pipelines built by the Soviet Union to supply gas to its satellites were designed to operate in one direction only, from Russia westward. Promoted by Donald Tusk, the European Energy Union fostered some important initiatives with the aim to achieve energy independence, such as regasification projects. And so since 1st April, Poland is able to import significantly more gas from Germany, thanks to the expansion of a pumping station at Mallnow on the border. The gas in the Yamal pipeline, which brings Russian gas to Germany (via Belarus and Poland), can, for the first time, be pumped from west to east. Moreover, a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal is under construction at the moment. This will start importing gas on tankers from Qatar next year. Accordingly, Poland can meet its own gas needs entirely thanks to these initiatives. Nevertheless, importing gas from Russia is still cheaper than the existing alternatives and Poland is still bound by a long-term gas supply from Russia that expires only in 2022.
As a consequence, among the most important factors shaping Polish energy security policy are its relations with Russia. It is through this perspective that we must analyse the importance of Moscow’s so-called energy policy, especially with regard to possible, but politically conditioned, supplies of natural gas to Europe. An illustrative example of this policy was the construction – in particular with the aid of German financing – of the so-called “North European Gas Pipeline”, located at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, bypassing Poland and other transit countries. The strategic objectives of the Russian Federation are as follows: a) Russia’s acquisition of decisive or full control of energy supplies to the European Union; b) the acquisition of partial or full control over energy distributors in EU countries; c) partial dependence of the EU on the Russian energy sector. In contrast, Poland’s goals are diametrically opposed, namely: building its own transport systems for oil, natural gas and electricity and its own energy infrastructure. An important element of the so-called diversification plan would be the search for new energy sources (particularly in the area of renewable energy, or exploration and then exploitation of shale gas). Despite many official declarations, Poland still has a huge problem with energy independence\(^5\), and it comes as no surprise that it is trying hard to initiate a common European energy policy. At the same time Jakub M. Godzimirski, expert of The Polish Institute of International Affairs, points to the current geopolitical context and states:

Russians actions in Ukraine have […] challenged the very basic norms promoted by the EU, and have gravely undermined the existing international order. Russia has breached international law and invaded a neighbouring country to punish it for its pro-Western choice. Russia’s violation of international norms in Ukraine has had consequences for the EU’s thinking about energy cooperation with Russia. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has also made the EU more aware of the risks to which its

\(^5\) In March 2014, exactly when Russia was annexing Crimea, Poland was importing 70 per cent gas and 93 per cent oil from Russia. Cfr. A. Kublik, “Europa i Polska mocno uzależnione od gazu i ropy z Rosji” [Europe and Poland’s heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas], Gazeta Wyborcza, 24 March 2014.
energy security is exposed, partly due to the lack of diversification of suppliers and supply routes, and even more so because of its increasing dependence on imports from Russia. However, more action is needed to translate those new ideas into an efficient energy policy towards Russia, which is re-emerging as a power in Europe.

Conclusion

Trying to answer the title question: that is, whether long-term, peaceful cooperation between Poland and Russia is possible, or whether these countries are doomed to ‘eternal conflict’, we should consider the following factors:

1. The importance of geopolitics in contemporary Russia and Poland.
2. Complicated geopolitical relations between the Poles, Ukrainians and Russians.
3. The international context with special emphasis on the role of the European Union, NATO and Russian projects for a Eurasian Union.

Even a brief overview of Polish-Russian relations, referring to both the past and the present, shows their complexity and ambiguity. These relationships also seem to be burdened with an element of unpredictability, and perhaps even some fatalism. It is characteristic for short periods of ‘reconciliation’ or ‘thaw’ to be followed by much longer periods of non-cooperation, resentment, hatred, and armed conflicts. Undoubtedly, the most important factors negatively defining contemporary Polish-Russian relations should be attributed to geopolitics. Therefore, assessing contemporary geopolitical concepts, the Polish researcher Leszek Moczulski points to the importance of the Eurasian trend in current Kremlin policy, noting that: “The breakdown of the Soviet Union pushed Russia back to its former geopolitical location. A

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sentiment towards lost imperialism favours attitudes directed against the West and its civilization”. In this context he recalls the concepts of Dugin and Zhirinovsky; however, as Moczulski continues:

It would be wrong to assume that only extreme factions adopt these views. Such geopolitical thinking is becoming as common in Russia as was the concept of ‘natural borders’ in France a hundred years ago. Serious politicians postulate building a lasting stability in Europe based on two integration processes: the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian [...]. The geopolitical imperative for Russia should be achieving control over the entire Asian continent7.

Moczulski emphasizes the importance of the so-called ‘Russian Idea’, which is in his opinion a “synthesis of various Russian doctrines: autocracy, a state Orthodox church, slavophilism, panslavism, eurasianism and Marxism-Leninism. It is a doctrine openly opposed to occidentalism, which comprises a pro-Western doctrine, calling for the Europeanization of the country”8. Russian geopolitical convictions undoubtedly legitimize the expansionist policies of the Kremlin, implemented through methods ranging from influencing local elites up to the use of armed force as in Georgia or Ukraine. On these grounds a dispute with Poland, trying to realize its objective of ‘Ostpolitik’ (but along Euro-Atlantic lines) seems inevitable – especially after it became a member of NATO (1999) and the EU (2004). Thus, for Poland “one of the key problems connected with the subject of further extension of the Euro-Atlantic structures to the East is the overall relations between Russia and the United States and the European Union, with special consideration for the ex-satellite countries of the Soviet Union”9. In this context, Poland’s active stand on the

8 Ibid., pp. 514-515.
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events in Ukraine, in particular its negative assessment of Russia’s actions in Crimea and Donbas is not surprising. The events in Ukraine are not perceived in Poland as part of NATO’s strategy aimed at the ‘disintegration of Russia’. On the contrary, in Poland the conflict is strongly viewed as an indication of Russian expansionism, and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula as an unprecedented forced change to borderlines set in Europe after 1945. Despite the best intentions of those circles in Poland and Russia that would like to improve their mutual relations, despite the appreciation of the importance of Russia as a great state with a unique identity as well as a significant cultural heritage, the contemporary realities cannot lead to positive conclusions, especially in the context of the dispute over Ukraine in the years 2014-2015. The reality is that the relationship between Poland and Russia has in fact deteriorated significantly, thus:

Polish-Russian relations suffer under persistently difficult ambiguities. They concern the ‘deregulation’ of activeness of both countries within the post-Soviet sphere (with special emphasis on Ukraine and Belarus), but also the precise definition of the scope of economic cooperation, and finally the defining of objective differences on key issues such as energy security. To this should be added that controversial issues in relations with Russia should be solved within the framework of ‘Ostpolitik’, not only that of Poland, but implemented as part of the policy of the whole European Union.10

There are still a lot of unresolved historical issues that seem to hinder normalization of the relations with some countries, like Poland, at least in the short term. However, it is hard to depict Eastern Europe as a homogeneous entity in its relations towards Russia, since each country has its own national policy determined by its economic and political priorities.

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